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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was sent to a number of elementary and secondary school English and reading teachers in Connecticut, asking them to survey one or two different classes to determine their students' reading interests. Questions dealt with such topics as favorite type of book, favorite books, more recently read title, favorite authors, sources of information, sources of books, book purchases, characteristics of books, and expenditures on books. Usable responses were received from 1,647 male and 1,752 female students from 51 schools in 37 different towns and cities. Among the findings were that females in grades four through six preferred books dealing with problems of growing up, followed by animals, mystery/suspense, and romance; while romances dominated the interests of girls in grades seven through twelve. For boys, sports remained at the top of the list at all grade levels. Very few students listed the same titles as their favorites. Variety dominated also in the list of the most recent books students had read for their own information or enjoyment. In the selection of books, the dust jacket seemed to be the most important quality for students at all grade levels, except for males in grades 10 and 11, where the title of the book was slightly more important. (HOD)

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STUDENTS' READING INTERESTS--
A Report of a Connecticut Survey

Donald R. Gallo

As publishers and distributors, you know very well what has sold and what presently sells to kids and to schools. Your sales figures tell you that quite clearly. Last year we tried to discover some of the same things from the point of view of students themselves. In the process, we discovered some things that some of us "know" but have not had confirmed by hard evidence, and we discovered some things that none of us had previously known.

In January 1982, we conducted an extensive survey of students throughout Connecticut with the financial support of H.P. Kopplemann, Inc. and the Research Foundation of Central Connecticut State University where I teach. Briefly, we sent questionnaires to a number of English and reading teachers across the state, asking them to survey one or two different classes so we could get as wide a sampling as possible, from grades four through twelve. We surveyed a sampling of all types of schools: public, private, parochial, and technical, in urban, rural, and suburban areas. We received usable responses from 1647 males and 1752 females--a total of 3399 students--from 51 schools in 37 different towns and cities.

FAVORITE TYPE OF BOOK. The first question, appropriately, is what kinds of books do kids like to read? Out of 25 topics, we asked students to circle the three that interested them the most. The following charts show how extensive the interest is in romances, mysteries, and sports.

The importance of romances for females is not very strong in grades 4-6. There, Romance is only fourth in importance, with Problems of Growing Up first, followed by Animals and Mystery/Suspense. Romances take on their fullest importance in grades 7-12 where 57% of the girls noted that.

For boys, Sports remains at the top of the list at all three grade level groupings, though the gap between Sports and whatever is in second place is greatest in grades 4-6 where Sports was noted by 48% of the boys and Horror/Supernatural by 31%.

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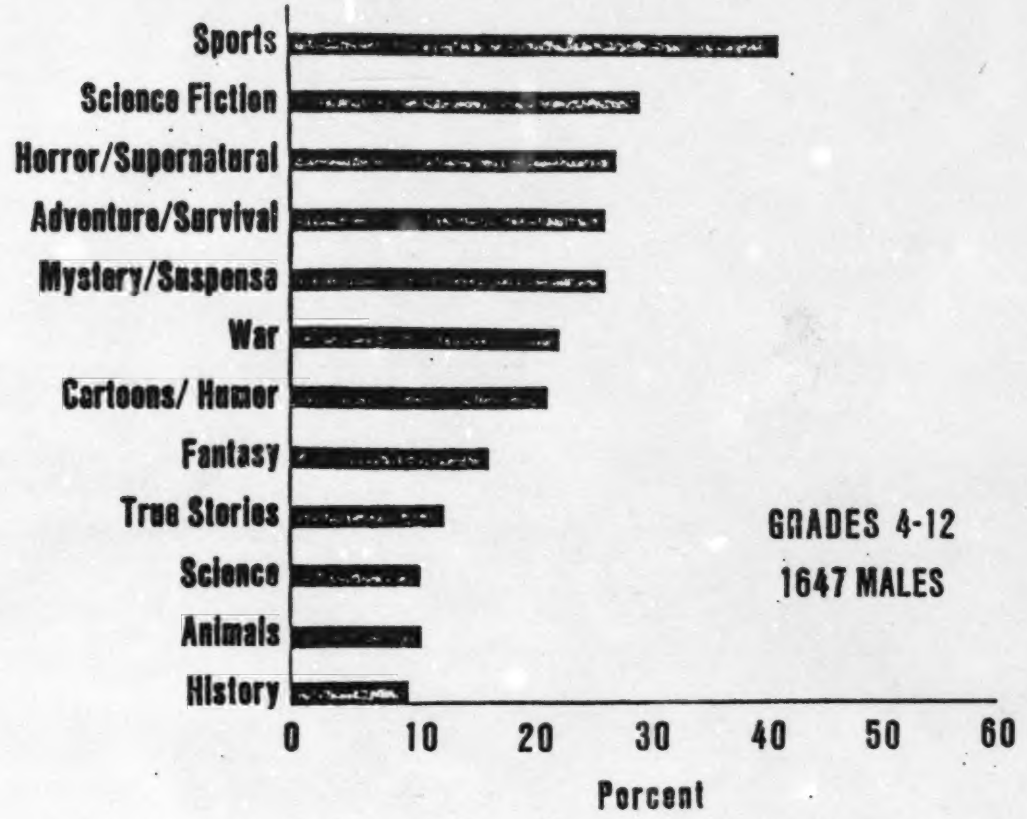
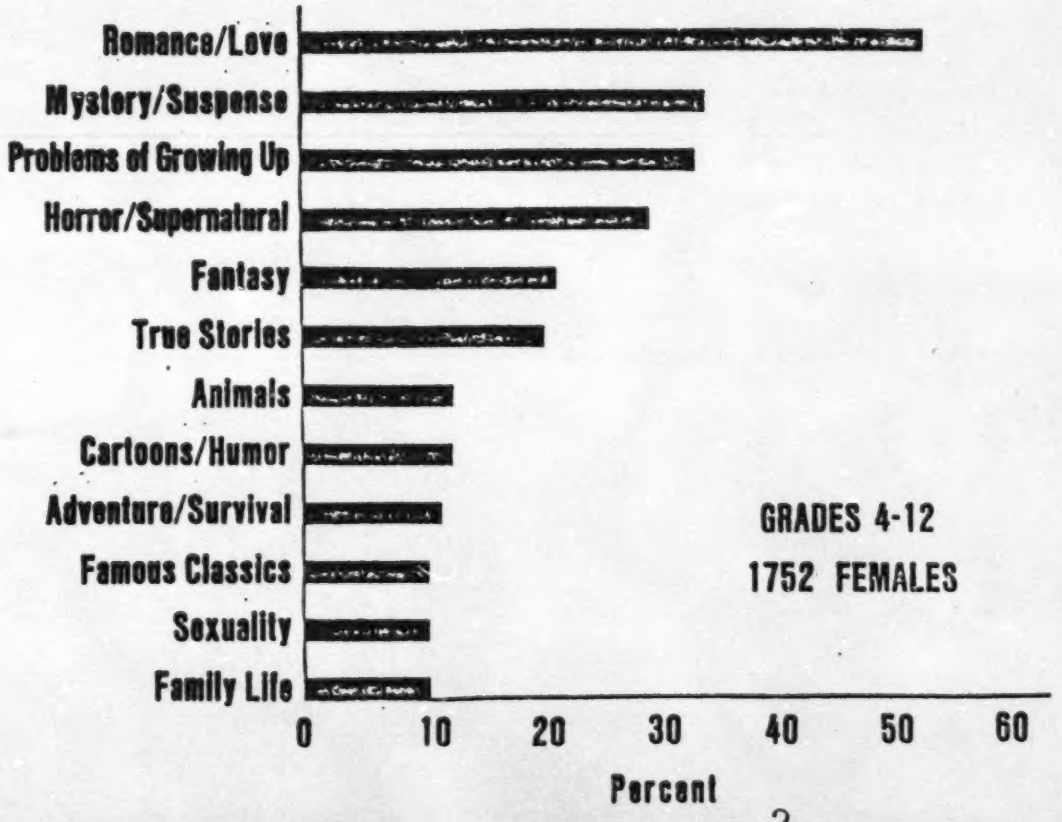
FAVORITE TYPES OF BOOK



FAVORITE TYPES OF BOOKS



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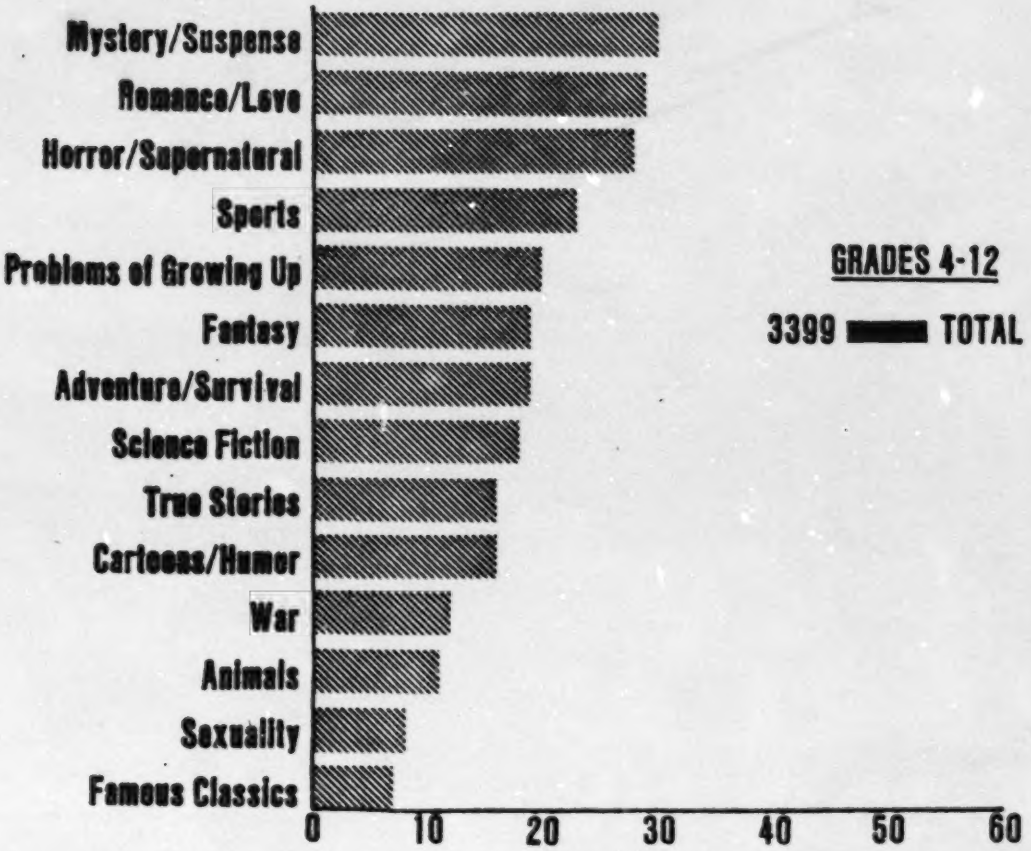


FAVORITE BOOKS. If those are the favorite topics, what are the favorite books? We asked students to list the best books (up to three titles) they had read during the previous two years and then we compiled the most frequently listed titles. The most obvious finding is that there are very few titles that stand out. That is, while most students listed a favorite title, very few students listed the same titles. Variety is therefore the most dominant quality of students' reading--in all grades. By grade, here are the most frequently mentioned titles and the percentage of students noting that title:

grade	title	percent
4	SUPERFUDGE	30
5	ARE YOU THERE, GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET	18
6	SUPERFUDGE	7

grade	title	percent
7	WHERE THE RED FERN GROWS	7
8	FLOWERS IN THE ATTIC	7
9	FLOWERS IN THE ATTIC	8
10	THE OUTSIDERS	7
11	TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD	8
12	OF MICE AND MEN	5

In the elementary grades, the top three titles in grades 4, the top five titles in grade 5, and five of the top six titles in grade 6 were written by Judy Blume. FLOWERS IN THE ATTIC was not only the most popular title overall in grades 8 and 9. It was there almost exclusively because of its popularity among females. In fact, in grades 7-12, 11% of the females noted that as their favorite book. (Another 8% noted PETALS IN THE WIND, while 4% noted IF THERE BE THORNS.) Among males in grades 8-10, THE OUTSIDERS held top position; OF MICE AND MEN took over first place for males in grades 11 and 12.

MOST RECENT TITLE READ. Variety dominated also in the list of the most recent books students had read for their own information or enjoyment, everything from trash to classics. A few titles were repeated in each grade, though not many.

grade	title	percent
4	SUPERFUDGE	9
5	(none)	-
6	BIG RED	1
	THE OUTSIDERS	1
7	WHERE THE RED FERN GROWS	3
8	FOREVER	2
	THE OUTSIDERS	2
9	THE AMITYVILLE HORROR	2
	FLOWERS IN THE ATTIC	2
	THE PIGMAN	2
10	NO ONE HERE GETS OUT ALIVE	1
11	THE CRUCIBLE	3
12	NO ONE HERE GETS OUT ALIVE	2

ASSIGNED BOOKS--BEST AND WORST. Variety still dominated on lists of best liked and most hated assigned books, but certain books gained a lot of responses because students in one school seemed to really enjoy a particular book, or a whole group really hated their assignment. The figures in the following chart are numbers of students noting that title, not the percentage.

ASSIGNED BOOKS

All Students

Grade	Best	Worst
4	Secret Garden 17	———
5	Sounder 10	———
6	My Brother Sam Is Dead 32	A Wrinkle in Time 15
7	Where The Red Fern Grows 13	The Light in The Forest 15
		Johnny Tremain 15
8	Cheaper By The Dozen 18	The Light in The Forest 19
	The Hound of The Baskervilles 18	
9	The Outsiders 54	Johnny Tremain 15
10	Romeo and Juliet 77	Romeo and Juliet 44
11	Macbeth 29	The Scarlet Letter 22
12	The Scarlet Letter 39	The Scarlet Letter 18

AUTHORS. It is surprising that many students did not note a favorite author. It is also surprising that there was not as great a variety in the list of favorite authors as there was in the listing of favorite titles. Only a few authors' names came up again and again. And there wasn't much change throughout the grades, though the changes that did occur are very interesting. Here again, the figures in the chart indicate the number of students, not the percentage.

FAVORITE AUTHORS

GRADE	MALES		FEMALES		BOTH	
4	BLUME	39	BLUME	57	BLUME	96
	CLEARY	13	CLEARY	28	CLEARY	41
	CHRISTOPHER	9	SILVERSTEIN	6	CHRISTOPHER	9
					SILVERSTEIN	6

GRADE	MALES		FEMALES		BOTH	
5	CHRISTOPHER	9	BLUME	33	BLUME	40
	BLUME	7	CLEARY	9	CLEARY	10
	DIXON	5	KEENE	7	CHRISTOPHER	10
6	BLUME	20	BLUME	97	BLUME	117
	CHRISTOPHER	10	CLEARY	24	CLEARY	31
	HITCHCOCK	9	DANZIGER	10	HITCHCOCK	11
	TOLKEIN	9				
7	BLUME	22	BLUME	83	BLUME	105
	TOLKEIN	16	CLEARY	11	TOLKEIN	19
	HITCHCOCK	7	CHRISTIE	10	CLEARY	12
					HITCHCOCK	12
8	HINTON	19	BLUME	80	BLUME	86
	KING	11	ANDREWS	23	HINTON	36
	BRADBURY	9	HINTON	17	KING	24
	STEINBECK	9				
9	TOLKEIN	24	BLUME	82	BLUME	87
	HINTON	18	KING	26	KING	35
	STEINBECK	14	ANDREWS	23	TOLKEIN	29
10	POE	21	BLUME	65	BLUME	72
	HINTON	19	KING	32	KING	42
	TOLKEIN	16	STEINBECK	24	HINTON	41
			ANDREWS	24		
11	TWAIN	15	BLUME	31	BLUME	31
	STEINBECK	14	POE	18	POE	30
	POE	12	CHRISTIE	16	STEINBECK	23
12	STEINBECK	24	STEINBECK	22	STEINBECK	46
	TOLKEIN	19	KING	19	KING	27
	POE	15	STEELE	16	TOLKEIN	25
	SHAKESPEARE	12	BLUME	15	DICKENS	24
	DICKENS	9	CHRISTIE	15	SHAKESPEARE	23
			DICKENS	15		

The dominance of Judy Blume from grades 4 through 11 is astounding. English teachers, of course, will be pleased to see the relatively high ratings for Dickens and Shakespeare in grade 12.

REPEATED READINGS OF AUTHORS. While many students have favorite authors, the importance of an author's name on a book is not as great as we expected it to be. And that appeal diminished as students got older. We asked "If you enjoy reading a book, how often do you try to find and read another book by the same author?" As the next chart shows, more than half of the elementary students indicated ALWAYS or OFTEN. Girls were more likely than boys to do so.

Percent who ALWAYS or OFTEN read another book by same author

Grades	Males	Females	Both
4-6	51	57	54
7-9	35	46	41
10-12	25	43	34

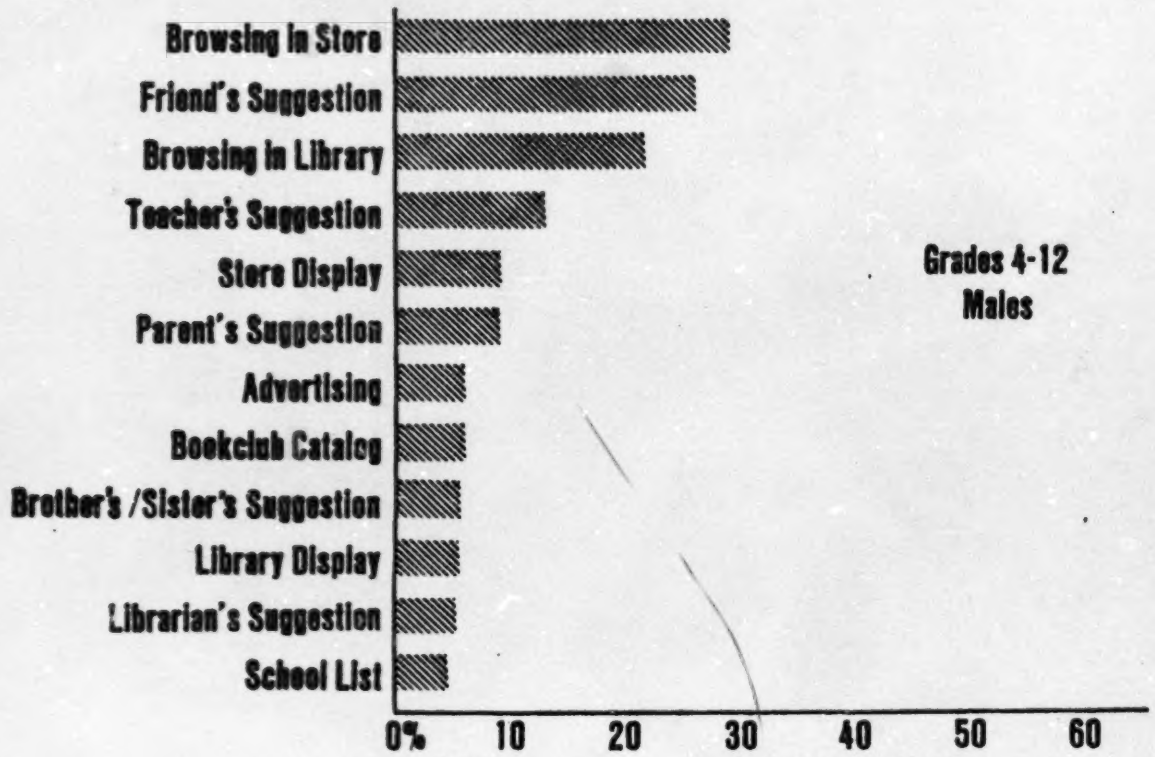
Percent who NEVER read another ...

4-6	9	5	7
7-9	18	4	11
10-12	21	6	13

The percentage of students who NEVER read another book by the same author was relatively small among females at all three grade level groupings, but it increased to a considerable proportion among boys in high school--one out of every five.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION. From where or whom are students most likely to hear about good books to read? As has been true in the past, FRIENDS are the main source for most students, though more so for girls than for boys. For boys, BROWSING IN A STORE is the main source. BROWSING IN THE LIBRARY is in third place.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT NEW BOOKS TO READ



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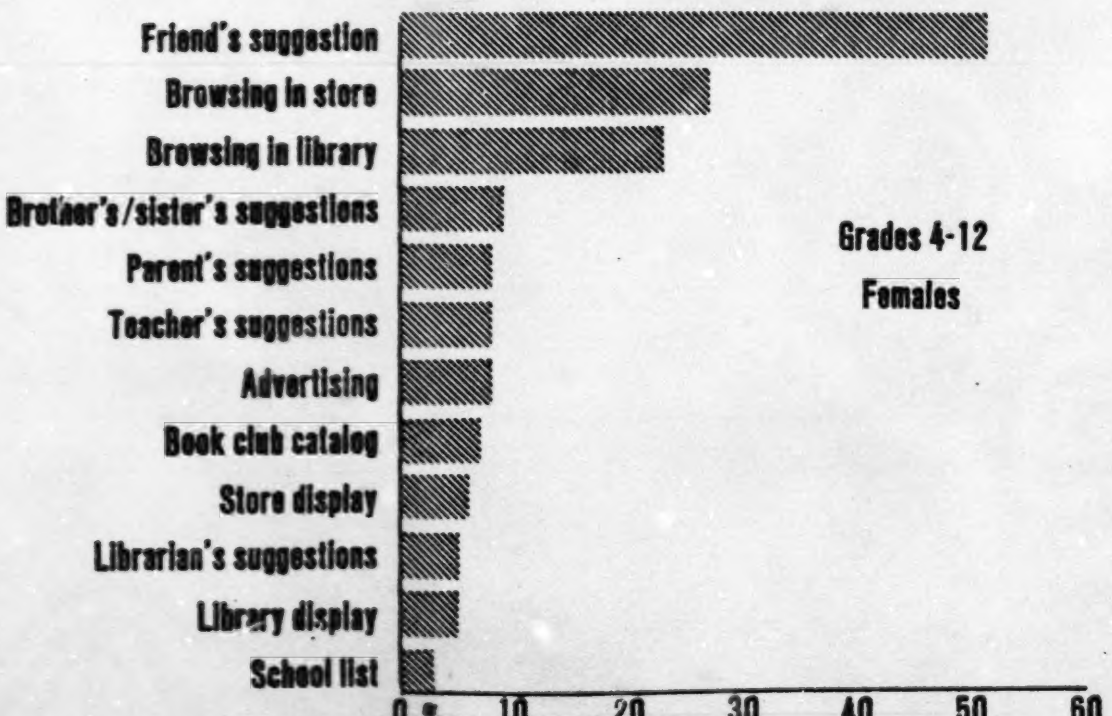

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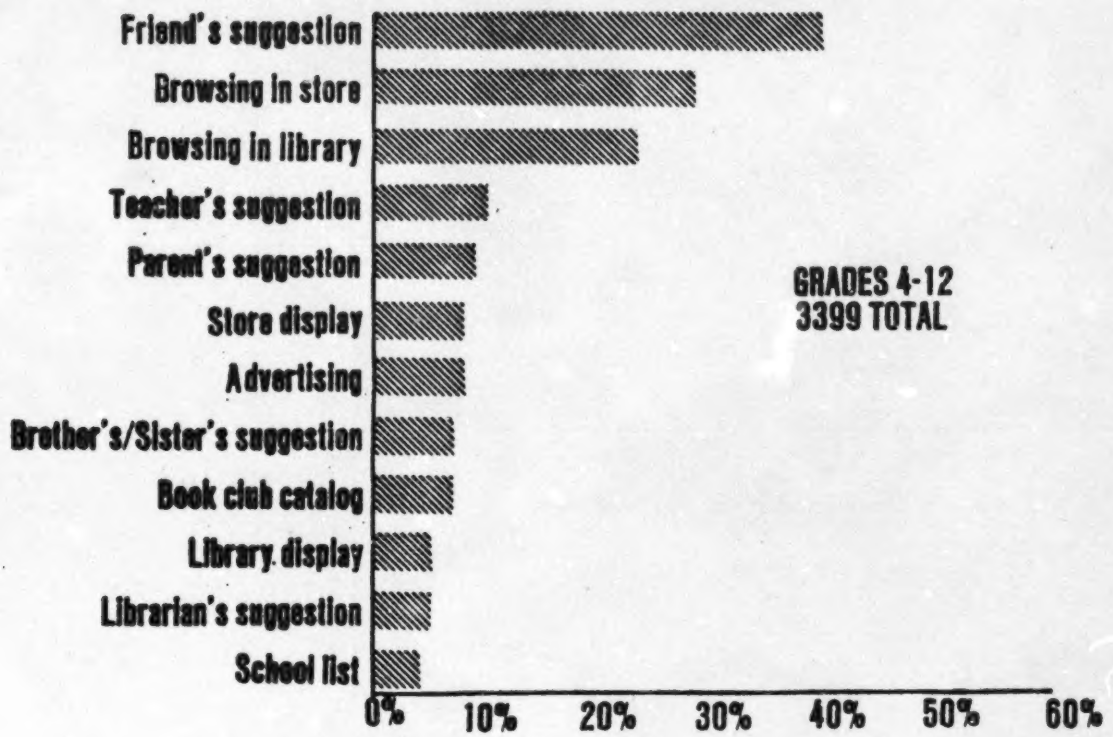

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT NEW BOOKS TO READ	Grades 4-6			Grades 7-9			Grades 10-12		
	All students	Males	Females	All students	Males	Females	All students	Males	Females
Friend's suggestion	36	25	47	42	28	55	38	25	50
Browsing in store	17	20	14	28	32	25	31	29	33
Browsing in library	28	25	31	27	27	27	18	18	18
Teacher's suggestion	12	15	9	8	11	6	11	13	9
Parent's suggestion	9	10	7	8	10	5	10	8	11
Store display	6	8	5	7	10	5	8	9	7
Advertising	5	6	4	6	6	7	9	9	10
Brother's/sister's suggestion	6	4	7	8	7	9	8	7	9
Bookclub catalog	17	18	16	7	6	8	3	4	3
Library display	7	8	7	5	6	5	5	5	4
Librarian's suggestion	19	14	24	4	5	3	2	2	2
School list	3	4	2	6	6	6	3	4	2

SOURCES OF BOOKS. The next chart shows that most students BUY the books they read, at least in grades 7-12, which is certainly good news to all of you.

SOURCES OF BOOKS ALL GRADES	Males	Females	Both
BUY THEM	27	27	27
TOWN LIBRARY	21	21	21
SCHOOL LIBRARY	20	14	17
FRIEND	6	18	12
PARENTS	6	6	6
BROTHER/SISTER	5	5	5
GIFT	6	4	5
CLASSROOM LIBRARY	6	3	4

The town library is usually preferred over the school library. In the upper grades, boys are more likely to use the school library, and girls are more likely to exchange books with friends. Relatively few students use classroom libraries as their main source of books, most likely because so few teachers have book collections in their classrooms, especially in the high schools.

PAPERBACKS VS. HARDBACKS. Do students prefer paperbacks or hardbacks or neither? The largest percentages in every grade did not express a preference for one or the other--an average of 53%. Those who did indicate a preference favored paperbacks. The greatest preference for paperbacks was from students in grades 7-9 where 44% preferred reading them, with 8th grade the highest--48%. Overall, a far larger percentage of females preferred reading paperbacks, with the greatest percentage in grades 7-9, most especially in grade 8 where 58% of the 190 girls preferred them. Only about 5% of the students said they preferred reading hardbacks, with more boys than girls (6% to 4%) indicating that preference.

It's quite a different story when it comes to BUYING a book. Then, approximately 9 out of every 10 students prefer a paperback, though fewer students--about 82%--in grades 4-6 prefer paperbacks. In all grades except 4th and 5th, more

girls than boys choose to buy paperbacks. Overall the percentages are about 95 to 88.

BOOK PURCHASES. As the next chart shows, BOOKSTORES are students' main source for book purchases, followed (a long distance back) by LARGE DEPARTMENT STORES (of the K-mart variety).

SOURCES FOR BOOK PURCHASES	GRADE 4-6			GRADE 7-9			GRADE 10-12			ALL GRADES		
	MALE	FEMALE	BOTH	MALE	FEMALE	BOTH	MALE	FEMALE	BOTH	MALE	FEMALE	BOTH
BOOK STORE	40	34	37	49	52	51	60	66	63	53	56	55
LARGE DEPT. STORE	13	13	13	11	11	11	13	13	13	12	12	12
SCHOOL BOOK CLUB	21	27	24	7	14	11	>2	2	>2	7	10	8
SCHOOL BOOK FAIR	8	13	10	12	9	10	4	2	3	7	6	7
PHARMACY	2	>2	2	4	4	4	6	5	6	5	4	5

The bookstore gains importance as students mature. In the lower grades, boys are more likely than girls to prefer the bookstore, while the opposite is true in grades 7-12, though only by a slight margin. School book clubs and school book fairs show strength in the lower grades and decrease as students age. That decrease, however, may be attributable to lack of teacher interest at the upper levels than to the lack of student interest.

CHARACTERISTICS THAT APPEAL. When selecting books, the SUMMARY OF THE BOOK on the dust jacket seems to be the most important quality for students at all grade levels except for males in grades 10 and 11 where the TITLE of the book is slightly more important. The attractiveness of the author's reputation, except perhaps for a very few superstars, does not seem to be very important to most students, carrying the most importance among younger students. It also seems that the

Cover picture is a stronger influence among junior high students--and among boys more than girls--than it is for either younger or older students.

Characteristics of a book that encourage you to read it.

	All Grades		
	Males	Females	Both
Summary of story	31	58	45
Title	25	18	21
Cover Picture	21	12	16
Theme	13	9	11
Author	4	3	4
Quotes from Reviews	4	4	4
First Paragraph	2	2	2
Thickness	3	1	2
other	3	1	2

Characteristics of a book that encourage you to read it

	Grades 4-6			Grades 7-9			Grades 10-12		
	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B
Summary	36	54	45	35	58	47	26	59	44
Title	23	17	20	23	18	20	27	18	22
Cover	20	10	15	24	15	19	19	11	15
Theme	10	16	13	11	9	10	15	8	11
Author	5	7	6	5	3	4	4	3	3

AN EXTRA $8. We asked "If you had an extra $8.00, which one of the following would you probably buy?" The following chart shows the responses:

WHAT TO BUY WITH $8.00

All Grades

	Males	Females	Both
Record	50	56	53
3 Paperbacks	12	22	17
3 Magazines	16	11	13
Audio Tape	14	6	10
Hardcover Book	4	2	4
(Rent) Video Tape	4	1	3

It is not surprising how many kids would buy a record. And it is pleasing to see how such a large percentage would choose to buy paperbacks. The breakdown by grade shows some interesting variations. Notice especially the increase for records with age and the corresponding decrease for paperbacks, a rather large decrease in fact.

What to buy with $8.00

	Grades 4-6			Grades 7-9			Grades 10-12		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both
Record	39	50	44	48	54	52	55	60	50
3 Paperbacks	21	34	27	14	25	20	7	17	13
3 Magazines	10	6	8	16	8	12	17	15	16
Audio Tape	15	3	9	12	9	11	16	5	10
Hardcover Book	6	6	6	4	2	3	3	2	3
(Rent) Video Tape	9	2	6	5	<1	3	2	<1	1

HOW MUCH TO SPEND. A question with a similar purpose asked students how much they were "usually willing to spend to buy a book." While we expected most students to say something like $1.50 or so, only 16% of the students who responded to this item said they would spend less than $2.00 (and that figure included all those who said they wouldn't spend a cent for a book).

Willing to spend on a book

	Grades 4-6			Grades 7-9			Grades 10-12			All Grades		
	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B
< 1.00	5	5	5	11	3	7	15	3	9	12	3	7
1-1.99	15	21	18	10	14	12	4	4	4	8	10	9
2-2.99	28	36	32	20	30	25	19	26	22	20	29	25
3-3.99	16	16	16	12	20	16	11	23	17	12	21	17
4-5.99	18	15	17	24	19	21	22	25	23	22	22	22
6-7.99	7	1	4	6	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	5
8-9.99	3	2	2	5	4	5	10	7	8	7	5	6
10+	8	4	6	13	5	9	14	8	11	13	7	9

The largest category of response was $2-$3, true. But fully 59% of the students said they are willing to spend $3 or more and one out of every five said they'd pay $6 or more for a book! In most cases, boys seem willing to spend more than girls to buy a book, even though boys usually read less than girls.

SELF-CENSORSHIP. When asked which of 14 topics would offend them so much that they would stop reading the book, a surprising number of students indicated at least one of the topics. (Many of the students who checked one category checked more than one category, indicating a concern about a number of issues. For example, a student who checked SAD EVENTS was also likely to check UNHAPPY ENDINGS and DEATH.

Only about 38% of the males said they were not offended by any of the topics; that percentage was consistent for males in all three grade level groupings. Not so for females. While a smaller percentage of females checked the NONE category in grades 4-6 (30%), girls seem to engage in less self-censorship as they mature. In grades 7-9, 44% of the females checked NONE: that percentage increased to 48% in grades 10-12.

The topic that engendered the greatest number of negative responses from both sexes at all grade levels was HOMOSEXUALITY. Essentially one out of every four students said they would stop reading a book if they encountered homosexuality in it, with the percentages for males being considerably higher than for females in the upper grades. In grades 4-6, 25% of the girls and 22% of the boys checked that topic. But that changed in grades 7-9 where 18% of the girls and 32% of the boys indicated HOMOSEXUALITY. In the senior high school, it changed slightly to 17% for the girls and 34% for the boys.

The next three most prominent topics to which students objected are CRITICISM OF RELIGION (about 18% overall, for both males and females), and CRITICISM OF AMERICA (about 13% overall, but higher for boys than for girls). The latter two topics were more strongly objected to in the elementary grades.

Those topics were followed by UNHAPPY ENDINGS (10% overall, with more girls than boys being bothered by that), DRUG USE (9% overall, but with much higher levels of objection --20%--in the elementary grades and much lower--5%--in the high schools), and VIOLENCE (8% overall, but with girls being almost three times as likely as boys to check that category--e.g. 3% males and 11% females in the high school).

In addition, though the number of students checking some of the other categories was relatively low, it seems significant to note that girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to be bothered by DEATH, SEX, SAD EVENTS, and "DIRTY" LANGUAGE, while males seemed more likely to be bothered by RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES described in books.